

## Méhul's *Uthal*

Gérard Condé

With the exception of the revolutionary song *Le Chant du départ*, a piece whose composer most people are unable to identify, Étienne-Nicolas Méhul owes his reputation solely to *Joseph*, the only one of his thirty-five dramatic works that has never ceased to be performed since its premiere in 1807, and to a lesser extent the brilliant overture *La Chasse du jeune Henri*. This degree of oblivion is by no means a modern phenomenon, for Berlioz was already deploring it in 1852...

Born in Givet, in the Ardennes, in 1763, Méhul moved to Paris to round off his musical training, and was lucky enough to be introduced to Gluck, who sensed his talent and gave him advice that oriented him towards a career in the opera house. In 1790, he made a brilliant debut at the Opéra-Comique with *Euphrosine*. While contributing to the lustre of the revolutionary festivals (the typical style of which is reflected in the *Morceau d'ensemble* 'Vers le palais de ses nobles ancêtres', no. 4 of *Uthal*), he composed copiously for the theatre with varying degrees of success and participated in the foundation of the Paris Conservatoire. His career continued during the Empire period, culminating with *Joseph* in 1807, before the success of Spontini and the progress of the consumption from which he suffered sapped his energy. His death in 1817 coincided with the first Paris performance of a work by Rossini (*L'Italiana in Algeri*), marking the dawn of a revolution in taste that proved fatal to the aesthetic of which he had been a noted exponent.

Fortunately, though, a few isolated revivals, as well as recordings of his piano sonatas, his four symphonies and a few operas (notably *L'Irato*,

*Stratonice* and most recently *Adrien*), have permitted wider appreciation of his genius. Yet *Uthal*, for the small number of people aware of its existence, has until now meant no more than the cruel remark attributed to Grétry after the premiere on 17 May 1806: 'I would have given a louis d'or to hear an E string!'

This ironical barb was aimed at Méhul's decision to have the violinists exchange their instruments for violas, in order to give the orchestra a sombre, melancholy colour in keeping with the atmosphere of Ossian's world. This is particularly true of the Overture, where the woodwind instruments, playing the role normally assigned to the violins, stand out with a cutting edge over the restlessly undulating waves of the lower strings, as they do once more in the ensemble 'Braves vengeurs, d'une juste querelle'. A similar effect is achieved in Uthal's *Romance* (no. 5, 'Pour prix d'un bien si plein de charme') and in the *Chant des Bardes* ('Près de Balva'), where the viola parts, tightly packed in the lower medium register, enfold the perpetual motion of the harp. Basing himself solely on second-hand reports of the omission of the violins, Berlioz did not hesitate to assert, in *Les Soirées de l'Orchestre*, that 'the result was monotony, more wearisome than poetic, in the continuous presence of this chiaroscuro timbre'. An 'unbearable monotony', we read in his *Grand Traité d'orchestration*. And yet *Uthal*'s brevity hardly gives weariness time to set in...

Grétry's remark was no more than a bon mot in comparison with the arguments put forward by Cherubini (in an article quoted by Arthur Pougin) to justify his unsympathetic reaction to *Uthal*. Cherubini was thinking of the rather too obvious penchant for imitative writing that may be observed, for example, in Malvina's arioso 'Pour soulager tes maux'. Méhul here took his inspiration from archaisms in a religious style in order to underline the character's piety.

Though controversial and subsequently largely forgotten, *Uthal* nonetheless found its champions. In 1904, the Theater Dessau gave a performance of the work which, according to *Le Monde artiste*, enjoyed great success. In 1908, the supplement of *La Revue musicale* offered its readers

no less than a 150-page vocal score. Back in 1856, Castil-Blaze, in his *Histoire de l'opéra*, had put his finger on one of the most memorable passages:

The *Hymne au sommeil* sung by four bards, accompanied only by two harps, two flutes and two horns, is extremely fine; its melodious ensemble is agreeably varied by the arrangement of the harmony and the curiosity of a succession of deftly connected triads.

Some time after the death of Méhul, we are told by François Desplantes in *Les Musiciens célèbres*, the students of the singing class at the Conservatoire assembled at his grave in Père Lachaise cemetery to perform this Hymn to Sleep, the number from the opera that resisted oblivion longest. The luminous combination of horns, flutes and harp supporting the flowing, discreetly chromatic vocal polyphony totally bypasses academic models, and Malvina's plaints, superimposed on the second verse, do not detract from the impression of naturalness that makes this number so appealing.

In spite of its evident musical beauties, *Uthal* did not manage to keep a place in the repertory after its first fifteen performances. Arthur Pougin blamed this on 'Méhul's great fault of not paying enough attention to the intrinsic or dramatic value of the librettos he was offered and which he too readily accepted'. The subject comes from 'The War of Inis-thona', in which Ossian celebrates the valour of Oscar, who restores to the throne the elderly Annir, deposed by his son-in-law Cormalo. Jacques Bins de Saint-Victor embellished his libretto with episodes borrowed from other compositions of James Macpherson (1736-96). The prose 'translations' of supposed original Gaelic poems that Macpherson attributed to Ossian, a mythical bard of the third century, which had inflamed a whole generation's imagination on their publication between 1760 and 1763, were among Napoleon's favourite reading matter. Saint-Victor dedicated his libretto to Anne-Louis Girodet, who had painted a *Death of Malvina* and was, along with Ingres and Gérard, one of the artists most felicitously inspired by the Ossianic universe.

But by this time no one was fooled by the author's fabrication; Macpherson had made up a Scottish mythology virtually from scratch.

Hence it was with mischievous delight that the reviewer of the *Journal de l'Empire* dated 21 May 1806 started his article by pointing out that the plot is a transposition of Plutarch's *Lives of Agis and Cleomenes*, in which Cleombrotus (Uthal), the husband of Chelonis (Malvina), has usurped the throne of his father-in-law Leonidas (Larmor):

Perhaps the author of *Uthal* wished to take advantage of a sort of passing vogue that *Les Bardes écossais* enjoyed in Paris: he thought Ossian would be more fashionable than Plutarch, and I believe he was not mistaken. The subject would have been shorn of any kind of prestige if M. de Saint-Victor had undertaken to treat it in a Grecian context. There was a time when the Lacedaemonians would have been regarded as setting a more elevated tone than the Bards... I think the lyres of the musicians of Lacedaemon were much more harmonious than the supposedly golden harps of these ancient Scottish priests, who lived in a time and a country where no one saw much gold, and no one knew anything at all of music.

The *Gazette de France* of 19 May 1806 was also severe in its judgment of Saint-Victor's libretto:

This scheme offers nothing new or truly interesting. The scenes are not sufficiently well connected. The author is not yet familiar with the road on which he has just set out. We know that the heroes of Ossian, like those of Homer, often travel on foot, without entourage and without pomp. The beautiful maidens of Morven and Erin do even better; they sometimes take up the spear of battle, and brave death alongside their lovers. But in our theatres, these nocturnal excursions and monologues do not create the same illusion; it seems decidedly odd to us that proud Uthal should set off all alone in pursuit of his wife, and that he should defy an enemy army all by himself. The basic theme bears some resemblance to that of *King Lear*; Malvina's generous gesture in declaring in favour of the more unfortunate of the two men has already been used a thousand times over; but, in other respects, the characters are fairly well depicted, and the local colour is well

preserved. The verse is an imitation, often felicitous, of the Scottish bard; the silence of the evening, the murmur of the streams, the stormy winds, the cloud palace, the shades of the heroes recur constantly; the author strews the wild flowers of the Ossianic language in great handfuls, and all of this produces a somewhat bizarre effect in the land of the *opéra-comique*.

Where the music was concerned, the critic's view was entirely different:

The composer has much better grasped the character of the subject: his imagination has been fired at the *festal throne*. His Overture, broad in style and sombre in hue, skilfully evokes nocturnal phantoms and stormy winds. The duet for Larmor and Malvina is gentler and more tender in character. The entrance of the warlike sons of Morven [no. 2, 'Le grand Fingal, pour punir les rebelles'] is an original number; the sound of the harps, mingling with the far-off strains of the Bards, is wonderfully effective. The entrance of the Bards in *Ossian* has been much praised; I doubt whether it is more captivating in style.

Reference to Jean-François Le Sueur's opera *Ossian ou Les Bardes* (after Macpherson's poem 'Calthon and Colmal'), premiered at the Opéra on 10 July 1804, was inevitable, especially as the scale of its success overshadowed Méhul's brief work even before the latter's first performance. It is in this light that one should interpret the opening remarks of the *Journal du soir, de politique et de littérature des frères Chaigneau* dated 18 May 1806:

The first performance of *Uthal*, an opera in one act after the poetry of Ossian, last night enjoyed total success at the Théâtre Feydeau. The work would also have succeeded at the Académie Impériale de Musique, where it would not have been better played, nor staged with greater care. Its style is nobler and more elevated than is generally the case in the operas of the Théâtre Feydeau; but what makes this opera even more interesting is that the music is by the celebrated Méhul.

The *Journal général de France* of 19 May 1806 went still further, stating:

This is no *opéra-comique*, but a tragedy in the fullest sense of the word. The piece is almost wholly written in alexandrines adorned with all the pomp of the tragic style. The sentiments, the characters and the situations are in accordance with that style. This innovation obliged the actors to assume the tone, the accent, the gestures and all the solemnity of the French stage, and for a first attempt, it must be admitted that they emerged with great credit. It has sometimes been suggested that recitative should be eliminated from opera and spoken instead. Here was a genuine *grand opéra* with spoken recitative, and the audience seemed happy with it.

The journalist seemed to have forgotten that, from Méhul's *Euphrosine* to Cherubini's *Médée*, there had never been any lack of spoken dialogue in alexandrines on the French operatic stage.

Fixing its attention on this aspect, the *Gazette de France* of 19 May 1806 took the opportunity to pay tribute to the performers:

The passage from prose text to vocalism always has something bizarre and discordant about it; but the combination of poetry and music creates a genuine illusion. It would be to the advantage of several actors to support this genre; Madame Scio, for example, who is endowed with profound intelligence and sensibility, declaims almost as well as she sings. She well deserved her curtain call after the piece along with the authors. Gavaudan is already fairly well known in this genre, to which he ought to limit his ambition. Let him content himself with making us weep at the Opéra-Comique. Elsewhere, he might perhaps have as much to lose as the public: he is as fierce in the role of Uthal as Madame Scio is touching in that of Malvina. Solié played Larmor; his voice is declining, but it has something venerable and paternal in it. Baptiste, charged with the role of the First Bard, sang the Bards' Song of Consolation to perfection. He made us forget the implausibility of the scene; let that be enough praise for him.

To leaf through these reviews two centuries later arouses a curiosity that the authors' side-swipes whet still further; for example, we find the *Chant des bardes*, placed close to the denouement whose emotional nature it prepares, less striking for its implausibility than for the eloquence of the baritone voice orbiting around the tonic in its upper register and for the way it is suddenly interrupted. Castil-Blaze tells us that 'the subject of this romance or ballad is the touching episode of D'Ailly in *La Henriade*, which ends with this line: "Il le voit, il l'embrasse, hélas! c'était son fils"'.\* Voltaire making a guest appearance with Ossian: now there's a perplexing thought...

Our relationship to Early Romanticism, its fashions, its roots and its crazes, has changed. As we discover *Uthal*, we are no longer looking for the novelty that contemporaries could legitimately expect, but for the enrichment that a retrospective approach can bring us, since the works of the past interest us in so far as they are sufficiently of their period to be able to transport us there, and sufficiently rich in substance to resonate with our own period and illuminate it. Hence it is entirely valid for us to enjoy what our predecessors may have had their reasons for disdaining. We do not remake history; it is history that enjoins us to rewrite it.

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\* He sees him, he embraces him; alas, it was his son!

*Donné par l'auteur à l'Opéra-Comique le 23 Juillet an 1806.*

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MÉHUL  
UTHAL

# UTHAL

Opéra en un Acte

*Suite d'Ossian*

Paroles de M<sup>rs</sup> S. VICTOR

Musique de

## MÉHUL

*Membre de la Légion d'Honneur, de l'Institut des Sciences et des Arts, Associé Correspondant de l'Académie de S. Jacques, et l'un des Inspecteurs du Conservatoire Impérial de Musique.*



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Title page of the full score of *Uthal*.

Page de titre de la partition d'orchestre d'*Uthal*.